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TALKING POINTS ON SAFIRE OP-ED ARTICLE

o   In the wake of China's public announcement that it will abide by MTCR Guidelines and parameters, the Administration expects China to live up to both the spirit and the letter of its commitment.

o   If China does transfer know-how to produce M-9s or missiles with similar capabilities, this would be inconsistent with China's MTCR commitment.

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o   We have no confirmed reporting the Chinese have agreed to help the Syrians build M-9s or missiles with similar capabilities.

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WILLIAM SAFIRE

China's 'Hama Rules'

WASHINGTON

When Syria's dictator, Hafez al-Assad, decided to deal with an intifada of Muslim fundamentalists in 1982, he did not bother with rubber bullets, deportations or the killing of a neighboring terrorist leader.

On the contrary, he leveled his guns on the city of Hama and wiped out its center. About 20,000 people were bulldozed into mass graves. All such rules of firm dealing are now called "Hama Rules."

Hama has been largely rebuilt and repopulated with Assad loyalists and Syrian soldiers. South of the town is a facility under construction of interest to the world's nonproliferation agencies because it has been repeatedly visited by delegations of Chinese missile technologists. These scientists shuttle between the secret Hama plant and another, larger facility under construction at Aleppo.

Parts of the Aleppo plant are being built underground. Its expert workers underwent training in China last year. Some suspect that the Aleppo plant will produce surface-to-surface missiles.

The Hama plant, say these sources, is supposed to make sophisticated guidance systems for these missiles. It may also be improving the accuracy of the Scud-C missiles, with a range of 400 miles, sold to Syria last March by North Korea with Saudi financing.

The intelligence on the recent visits to the Syrian sites by the Chinese groups is, I think, "hard"; but the purpose of the new secret plants has not yet been confirmed.

If the Chinese have been contributing to the indigenous Syrian missile production, it would mean that Congress was right and the President wrong about the best way to stop China from helping increase the risk of war in the Middle East.

Last Nov. 17, after giving Chinese leaders diplomatic condonation by paying a visit to Beijing, Secretary of State Baker announced "clear gains in the fields of proliferation and trade." He told reporters this meant that the Chinese had agreed not to export M-9 missiles to Syria.

One week later, if my information is correct, the Chinese secretly agreed to help the Syrians construct their own missiles locally. This included the supply of Chinese equipment needed to assemble the advanced weaponry.

The plot: China would live up to the letter of its agreement with the U.S.

— holding back U.S. Pershing-type M-9's — but violate its spirit by making it possible for Syria to deliver destruction in a locally produced missile of equivalent range.

On Feb. 10, 1992, the Chinese scientists secretly visited the plants at Aleppo and Hama.

On Feb. 22, President Bush announced he would lift a ban on the export of satellite parts and high-speed computers to China. The ban had been imposed, according to Senator George Mitchell, "when a secret sale of Chinese missile launchers to Pakistan was revealed."

Next day, as its supervisory delegation was returning secretly from Syria, Beijing announced that "China will act in accordance with the Missile Control Technology Regime ... in its export of missiles and missile technology."

Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress has been concerned about sales by China

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Helping Syria build missiles.

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of missiles to Syria and nuclear technology to Iran. To discourage any backing away from commitment made by China on the Baker visit, a bill was passed to cut off Most Favored Nation status if Beijing reneged on its promises.

This week, on March 2, unaware of — or unworried about — possible Chinese participation in local Syrian missile production, President Bush vetoed the bill linking China's missile restraint to M.F.N. status. The Senate vote to override was 59 to 39, six votes short of the two-thirds needed.

Might six more senators, if informed of the Chinese circumvention of agreements touted by Secretary Baker even as the voting took place, have voted to override?

This sort of story is difficult for a journalist to check out; Hama's off limits for me. But I remember how a concern for verification two years ago constrained me from writing about Iraqi nuclear development for months. (At first that story was universally derided; it has since been confirmed.)

So I pose the question with appropriate caveats. What are those Chinese scientists doing in Syria? □